

Kentucky's lone transgender athlete can't play on the team she helped start

[Moriah Balingit](#) August 25, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



Fischer Wells, then 12, walks the running track with her classmates at Westport Middle School in Louisville in May. (Jon Cherry/For The Washington Post)

LOUISVILLE — When 13-year-old Fischer Wells signed up for field hockey last fall, she had never played the sport. Her parents were confounded. Fischer had run cross-country before and once tried out unsuccessfully for a street hockey team, but outside of that, the seventh-grader had not expressed much interest in sports.

A month into the season, her parents were fighting for her right to play. The first games had been marred with challenges. First, there were not enough players, until Fischer recruited classmates to fill out the team. Then Fischer's stick was too short. Finally, through a teary phone conversation with the athletic director, her parents had learned the Kentucky High School Athletic Association's rules would not allow Fischer to play.

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Because Fischer — besides being a middle-schooler with boundless enthusiasm, a bookworm and a novice field hockey player — is transgender. The association had set extraordinarily high hurdles for transgender athletes to play on teams that matched their gender identity. It required that transgender athletes undergo "sex reassignment" before puberty — though it was unclear what that meant. For transgender athletes who underwent sex reassignment after puberty, the association required that "surgical anatomical changes have been completed, including external genitalia changes and gonadectomy," procedures that are not recommended for young people.

The seventh-grader continued showing up to practices, but she couldn't bring herself to attend the game in which she'd be benched. Her absence seemed to galvanize her teammates, who could not believe she had been ousted for being herself. For every goal they scored, they shouted, "For Fischer!"

After a few days, Fischer won back her spot on the team when the school district ruled that its own nondiscrimination clause trumped the state athletic regulations. It was the Westport Warhawks' only victory

that season; on the field, they never won a game. For Fischer, that wasn't the point. Sprinting around the pitch and whacking the ball made her feel good. It was fun. She had an audience for her jokes.

[Activists face an avalanche of anti-transgender bills](#)

Then, after the first season concluded, Fischer would suffer another defeat that would sting worse than the first: In March, Kentucky lawmakers [passed](#) a law banning athletes like Fischer from playing on girls' teams.

Fischer was the state's only transgender student-athlete. Still, they believed, she had to be stopped.

The threat to fairness in girls' sports in Kentucky stands at 5-foot-6, with a chaotic mop of curly hair, long, spindly limbs, freckled cheeks and blue eyes that twinkle when she drops a witticism. Before starting field hockey, her highest athletic distinction was a cross-country coach's award for sportsmanship, earning her a trophy topped by a golden muscled man mid-stride. It stands atop a dresser crowded with Lego sculptures and her one other trophy, from participating in girls' field hockey.

But when state Sen. Robby Mills (R) won a three-year battle to ban transgender girls and women from school sports teams, he did not talk about Fischer Wells or the Westport Warhawks. Instead, on the day the Fairness in Women's Sports Act became law, he invited Riley Gaines, a highly decorated University of Kentucky swimmer, to talk about [Lia Thomas](#), a transgender competitor from the University of Pennsylvania who stirred controversy when she won an NCAA title in the 500-yard freestyle.

"You can see that it is indeed an issue in college athletics and, I believe, coming to be an issue in high school athletics," Mills said. In an interview with The Washington Post, Mills said he worried some young people would transition just to win competitions: "Sports is about winning, and people will go however far they need to go to win."

Transgender athletes and their advocates dismiss the notion as ridiculous given the difficulty of transitioning and the stigma that comes with being transgender. Asked about the lawmaker's comments, Fischer replied, "That's poop on the ground, and rotting. It's not true."

[GOP lawmakers push wave of bills targeting LGBTQ teens](#)

Supporters of these measures say they protect sports for cisgender girls and women. They say transgender female athletes have a biological advantage. ([The science on this is unsettled](#), and the studies have only examined adults, not children or teens.) Mills said Thomas won because "her reach was several inches longer" than other swimmers'.

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Very few student-athletes are transgender. A [2017 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey](#), which queried teens in 10 states and nine large urban districts, found that nearly 2 percent of high school students identify as transgender. Meanwhile, a Post analysis of CDC surveys from six states and six urban districts found that 43 percent of transgender students said they played sports — suggesting that about 1 percent of athletes in these jurisdictions are transgender.

Yet, nationwide, at least 18 states this year passed laws forbidding transgender girls — and sometimes transgender boys — from playing

on teams that match their gender identity. The effort to restrict transgender athletes in school sports came as part of a wave of legislation targeting LGBTQ students.

[GOP state lawmakers are also restricting](#) the way teachers talk about gender identity in classrooms, barring students from receiving gender-affirming health care and locking them out of bathrooms that align with their gender identity.

In neighboring Ohio, state lawmakers were considering a bill that would have called for genital inspections of student-athletes suspected of being transgender. In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott (R) [directed state agencies to investigate parents for child abuse](#) for seeking gender-affirming health care, such as hormones, for their transgender children. Conservative parents have also [targeted clubs for LGBTQ students](#).

Chris Hartman, executive director of Kentucky's Fairness Campaign, says the bills were part of a coordinated effort for Republicans to gain traction with conservative voters. Lawmakers are "seeking to drive a wedge between voters," Hartmann said. "We ended up with, again, this really vicious attack on one trans child in Kentucky."

Some leaders, even on the right, have rejected these measures. When Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican, [vetoed his state's effort to ban transgender students from sports](#), he pointed out that out of 75,000 high-schoolers who played sports in the state, there are only four known transgender athletes. State lawmakers overruled him, but a state court [recently halted the law](#) as part of a lawsuit brought by the parents of transgender athletes.

— Spencer Cox (@SpencerJCox) [March 22, 2022](#)

“Four kids and only one of them playing girls sports. That’s what this is all about,” Cox wrote. “Four kids who aren’t dominating or winning trophies or taking scholarships. Four kids who are just trying to find some friends and feel like they are part of something.”

Kentucky’s governor, Andy Beshear (D), at first also vetoed the sports ban authored by Mills when it passed alongside laws in 17 other states. State lawmakers easily overrode him.

A pink jacket, and a provocation

The first time Fischer slipped on this jacket at the Sassy Fox, a consignment store not far from her home, her face lit up, her mother said. It was shortly after she had broken the news to her parents that she was trans in the most unceremonious of ways: from the back seat of their SUV, when they were on their way to pick up the new family dog, Jolene, named for the Dolly Parton song.

“I want you all to know that I am transgender,” Fischer said.

In the passenger seat, her mother, Jenifer Alonzo, recalls that she replied calmly, “I’m so honored you told us.” On the inside, she was panicking about how to respond, thinking, “My child just said she’s transgender. What’s the right thing to say? Where’s my script?” She frantically searched the internet.

A year later, Fischer would wear the jacket again, this time in front of an audience of state lawmakers in Frankfort, Ky., who sought to ban girls such as her from playing. It was a statement of sorts, a provocation, a way to “make people mad that someone is wearing a pink jacket to the

Capitol," she said.

"I really don't want this bill to pass, because that means I can't play," Fischer told the legislators. "And that will be extremely detrimental to my mental health, because it's a way to help me cope with things."

The committee voted to advance the bill. It became law three months later.

Fischer is reticent about the ways this unusual chapter has affected her, about what it is like to be singled out by a branch of the state government, about what it's like watching the classmates she recruited head off to field hockey practice when she has been barred from competing.

Since she hit the field for the first time last fall, the fight for transgender rights has continued to rage. Swimming's world governing body, FINA, voted to [bar transgender athletes from competing in elite women's events](#). And the Biden administration plans to create rules protecting transgender students from discrimination — but said it had not yet decided how to proceed with accommodating transgender students in sports.

Transgender athletes are particularly vulnerable, because many of those who support their full and total inclusion in other arenas of life — in bathrooms and locker rooms, on revised birth certificates, in dress codes — hesitate when it comes to sports. It's an attempt to protect cisgender female athletes, who are already grossly underserved in all areas of sport, from pay to facilities to broadcast time.

[*Sweeping Title IX changes would shield trans students, abuse survivors*](#)

The Women's Sports Foundation holds that youth sports should be open to transgender athletes without restrictions. But at the elite level, the foundation "believes that appropriate governing bodies can and where necessary should set reasonable, evidenced-based standards," which sometimes include blocking athletes from competition during transition and mandating drugs that suppress testosterone production.

Fischer was invited to speak with members of Congress over the summer but declined. She learned she would get to talk to legislators only for a couple of minutes at a time, and she said that felt "disingenuous."

Fischer's parents worry about what comes next. Alonzo said they live a sort of double existence. In some ways, they have a charmed life in a safe suburb of Louisville with a school community that has embraced their transgender daughter. But lurking beneath that is the buzz of anxiety over what state lawmakers may pass next session.

One bill that failed in this year's session, for example, would bar Fischer and other youth from getting gender-affirming health care, such as puberty blockers and hormone therapy that assists them in their transition. A similar measure has already passed in Alabama and Texas, forcing families with transgender children to seek care out of state.

If that happens, Alonzo said, "then we can't be here."

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Fischer began eighth grade this month and watched her classmates return to the field hockey team she helped create. She is weighing playing on a YMCA team, further honing the skills she built last year.

The sport is difficult to learn. The J-shaped stick is too short, requiring players to bend low to the ground. The ball doesn't bounce, so it gets stuck in thick grass. A novice could easily swing hard and miss.

Fischer doesn't miss, and when she connects with the ball, the reverberations sometimes leave her fingers numb.

"It's amazing," Fischer said.

"It's like a crack. It runs up the stick to your hands," she added. "It's a really nice feeling."

Scott Clement contributed to this report.